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ABSTRACT

An English course tailored to the needs of non-English majors has been developed and implemented at West Texas State University. Students from the business world as well as from a wide variety of disciplines participate in the course, which empahsizes the principles of communication. In addition to a text specifically written for the course, students also study examples of the best writing produced in their fields. In the first section of the course, students study style and organizational devices and then write commentary on these elements as they appear in publications recommended by each student's departmental advisor. Reading techniques are also stressed. In the second section of the course, students use the textbook's rhetoric chapters to choose a method of approach and then produce two reviews. The aim is to complete a perfect paper. In the final section, each student has to write one research paper, a detailed report, a speech or script, and an article. Final copies are not marked, but rated as acceptable; good, but in need of revision; or unacceptable. The course teaches that clarity and precision are the most valuable aspects of language and that these qualities are essential to professionals in all fields. (FL)

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CARE AND FEEDING OF THE NON-ENGLISH MAJOR: THREE YEARS LATER

Some of you may have heard--and probably not remembered--a paper read here in 1974: "The Bone of Contention: The Academic Vegetarian and the Non-English Major." Reading from the abstract, I can very quickly refresh your memory or cue you in:

> The number of English hours required of a non-English major for a degree has become a matter of controversy between the academic vegetarian (the tinkerer who does not know there should be meat on the bone) and the educator (who knows the value of bones heavy with meat).
>
> English courses tailored to needs--the literature of the specializing field and composition on a professional level--of specializing students (sophomore and above) would serve other university schools and departments, provide a new teaching field, up-grade the value of the university degree, and thwart the academic vegetarian.

At the time I made these proposals, the thought occurred to me--what if I could actually implement them? In a real classroom, how would I teach the material I had outlined? It is one thing to

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dream a big dream of general achievement, but quite another to construct a syllabus that will lead the student even into the vicinity of the desired goal.

The first problem to solve was that of what text to use. Like most old English teachers, I had collected a number of devices that worked, at least part of the time. So I began--rather tentatively--to write a frame work to contain them. I still have that first draft, so I have proof that I too can write in textbookese--exactly the style the non-English major tunes out. So I began again and wrote a friendly text, editing out the cutesy bits as they crept in. The main thrust of the material is toward what the non-literary writer needs to know, if he is to write competitively. By the summer of 1975, I had a manuscript, complete with rhetoric and handbook, and a small grant that would permit me to have it printed offset and bound with a plastic spiral.

Again, it is one thing to write a textbook and quite another to get a course into the catalogue. My chairman, Dr. Pat Sullivan, is--luckily for all of us--innovative and supportive and believes in his faculty. So, building upon the contacts I had made with the heads of other schools and departments when I was preparing the 1974 study, I got his permission to interview the same people again, plus some new ones. Their response was cordial and enthusiastic: they wanted the course and would recommend it to their majors. Then Dr. Sullivan took the ball and deposited it behind the goal line--the catalogue entry. Under his aegis, it also became part of the core curriculum as an elective under Communications.

So now I had only to be sure the class "made." I sent out a letter to all the manufacturers in the area, apprising them of

the course and pointing out the advantages of training for their rising young employees--especially those who needed to write PR material, reports, speeches, and intelligible interoffice memos. I re-visited a number of Amarillo businessmen whom I had known in another life and solicited their interest. The result was a year of classroom excitement, the like of which I have seldom known. In 1975-76, students from business (Diamond Shamrock and Pantex Corp.) and others majoring in pre-law, microbiology, social work, psychology, journalism, geography, geology, agri-business, speech therapy, art therapy, political science, and military science found themselves involved in a common task--learning to communicate on several levels.

You are thinking to yourself, eeegaaad! how can one class serve so many interests? The secret is that the text and the classroom concentrate on <u>principles</u> of communication, plus the models of sytle and format found in the best writing produced in the students' fields. Then, as a modus operandi, the classroom becomes--for two hours a week--a workshop where students read their works in progress and learn how to listen and comment analytically and to keep a record of comments and the satisfactory revisions that result from them.

The course is listed in the cataloque as Literature and Composition for Pre-professional Students. Many ask, "What kind of literature?" And the answer is, "The literature recommended by the students' departmental advisors." That blows some academic minds. But the students love it. They revel in articles, books, and other writing concerned with the thing they are most interested in. They gain background that they would never acquire on their

own, and they have no trouble finding topics for composition--only in choosing among the many things they have been stimulated to say by reading from the best minds at work in their fields.

To be more specific about that m.o., the first section of the course is devoted to analysis of style, recognition of organizational devices, and reading techniques. Written work is confined to commentary on those matters as they appear in magazines, journals, books, and pamphlets recommended for reading by the student's departmental advisor. Naturally, some of these students are not accomplished readers. Especially for them, the text has a chapter on reading techniques, which free the slow or reluctant readers to enjoy what they must read and which encourage them to browse for pleasure. In this section, they spend much of their time in the library, becoming acquainted with the areas most useful in their field.

In the next section of the course, students put their analytical skills to work. From the chapters on rhetoric in the text, the students choose a method of approach--the critical review, the stylistic analysis, the comparison, or some other that seems practicable--to produce reviews of one fiction and one non-fiction work. The students read their work in progress and are encouraged to confer with me. The aim is to produce a perfect paper. For most, this is a totally new concept. A paper has always been something to dash off barely under the wire without serious consideration of every detail--form, style, content, organization, etc. The teacher's part, then, was to mark it prodigally with red pencil. This effort to have an unmarkable paper--aided and abetted by the very instructor who will grade it--produces some astonishing results. It is also

preparation for the final section of the course.

In the next weeks, the student makes an individual assignment schedule. Each must produce one research paper (using the methods of organization, citation of sources, and presentation of bibliography acceptable in the field); a detailed report; a speech or radio/TV script; and an article. Reading, note-taking from class analyses; and private conferences are the order of the day. The students turn in each paper according to the schedule for a preliminary marking. Mechanical errors must simply not exist in the final copy. The constant emphasis is on a paper suitable to submit to an editor of a professional magazine. With that criterion in mind, I do not mark these final copies but simply rate them as acceptable (A or B); good, but in need of revision or correction (C); and unacceptable (D or F). Since these papers are almost always turned in for credit or extra credit in other courses, I have not had any of the last category.

The typical final examination consists of a theme which the students do not write. They choose a topic and tell where in the text they would go for help in writing it; to the chapter, "First Aid for Composition," where they will find information on thesis-writing and the "interesting beginning"; to the chapters on "Some Options: and "More Options," where they would justify their choice of a developmental method in the light of their theses; to the chapter, "Twenty Questions (Mostly Fewer)," for help with content and more material on logical order and the conclusion; and finally to the "Storeroom" (handbook) for foreseeable difficulties with quotations, square brackets, and other exotica. The students must know the textbook very well in order to use it thus. This is a full, two-hour exam, since it results in a well-organized paper of

good content.

There are a number of things student learn from this course that their departmental advisors heartily approve. One is to believe that they can and must produce an unmarkable paper. Another is that they become thoroughly familiar with the writing style and research techniques of their field. Another is that they acquire not only more background information than the average student in the advisor's classes, but that they are not afraid to tackle library assignments.

What members of the class learn from each other is respect for interests far different from their own. They learn that clarity, conciseness and precision are the most valuable aspects of language and those qualities are just as essential to the business executive and the psychologist as they are to the art therapist and the journalist. They see the class as a place where the university is at work, all the disparate schools and departments bound together by one common concern--written language.

After even so short a trial, we at WT have begun to believe that this course contributes materially to the nurture of the non-English major. It is a heady and deeply satisfying thing to see the bone of contention fleshed out with real meat--strong, comely, and capable.